

## Challenges Associated with the Implementation of Local Economic Development in Polokwane Local Municipality, South Africa

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### Abstract

*The paper seeks to probe the challenges associated with the implementation of local economic development (LED) in Polokwane Local Municipality. The authors argue that local government in South Africa is associated with a multiplicity of challenges in implementing the LED strategy. Local economic development as a development strategy has, in the recent past, gained widespread popularity and acceptance as a grassroots-based approach, especially in the developing world. Local economic development has increasingly emerged as a crucial policy imperative for local communities across the globe, including in South Africa. The emergence of LED is explained by various government policies. However, the implementation and success of LED have also not been championed by local municipalities. This is reflected by the ever-increasing unemployment and poverty rates, as well as low economic development in rural areas. The paper employed a qualitative research approach as it relies on empirical evidence from existing literature, journals and government documents to sustain the argument. The findings of the study include the following challenges: political meddling, shortage of resources, lack of capacity, limited experience, lack of funding for LED, political interference, poor political leadership, lack of efficient bureaucracy, corruption and Infrastructure availability. The study recommends that further research should be conducted in South Africa's local government to detect problems associated with LED. The study further recommends mechanisms that can be used to adequately address LED challenges.*

**Key-words:** Local Economic Development, Local Government, Polokwane Local Municipality, Developmental Local Government.

## Introduction

Local Economic Development (LED) emerged in developed countries in the northern hemisphere and was adopted after the post-1994 democratic dispensation in South Africa (Van der Walt, 2018). According to Ackron and Auriacombe (2016), the advent of the new constitutional dispensation in 1994 heralded significant transformational and governance reform in South Africa. In particular, the *White Paper on Local Government, 1998*, formally introduced the concepts of LED and Developmental Local Government (DLG) into the South African vernacular, consistent with the evolving national zeitgeist of the developmental state. Thani (2020) asserted that LED, therefore, had its genesis in, and was from the start in effect largely consigned by statute to the local government sphere in the South African context, arguably the governmental sphere least equipped to deal with it. The LED strategy (2019) stipulates that the concept of LED has been gaining prominence in development theory and practice over the last decade. As a result, numerous concepts and definitions of LED have emerged, partially overlapping, partially complementary, and partially contradictory. The *White Paper on Local Government, 1998*, reinforces the LED role of municipalities through the concept of DLG. For an LED to be effective, a community needs to identify and consider its economic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and agree on a shared vision and strategy.

Meyer and Venter (2013); Koma (2014) describe LED as an important strategy to boost local economies, to address high levels of poverty, unemployment and inequalities facing most communities. In addition, Nkwinika and Munzhedzi (2016, p. 76); Rogerson and Nel (2016) stress LED as a localised 'place-based' approach to local development. LED as a development strategy has in the recent past gained widespread popularity and acceptance as a grassroots-based approach, especially in developing countries (Kahika & Karyeija, 2017, p. 159; Gamede, 2020, p. 388). LED as a development strategy has since evolved over the past few decades and is widely considered by various governments, development policy makers and organisations or agencies around the world (Shilangu, 2019, p. 632; Mabunda & Ndou, 2019, p. 347; Maela, Munzhedzi & Mathebula, 2025). Globally, Straydom (2016, p. 73) argues that LED has increasingly emerged as a crucial policy imperative for local communities. Hofisi, Mbeba, Maredza, and Choga (2013, p. 591) note that the emergence of LED is explained by various government policies. However, the implementation and success of LED have also not been championed by local municipalities. This is reflected by the ever-increasing unemployment and poverty rates, as well as low economic development in rural areas (Straydom, 2016, p. 73). Mubangizi identifies an array of factors that typically prevent local municipalities from effectively delivering on their mandate, part of which is LED. Local government was designated as a separate sphere of government that was to play a central role in the economic development of the country (Mathebula & Sebola, 2019).

## Research Questions

This paper seeks to discover the problems associated with LED implementation in Polokwane Local Municipality. Therefore, the question of this paper reads as follows: What are the challenges faced by Polokwane Local Municipality in implementing LED? In response to the identified challenges, recommendations were proposed to address the problem in the municipality.

## Theoretical Foundation: Development Theory

Qureshi (2019, p. 381-382) holds that the concept of development has been used by scholars and practitioners to demonstrate changes for the better in the lives of individuals, communities, nations and regions. In addition, Qureshi (2019) explains that the practice of development has historically been associated with interventions and categorizations that have had the opposite effect in countries and regions deemed to be developing. Hence, the current notions of development predicated on respect for individual rights, human freedoms, environmental sustainability, health and well-being and education have been more successful in achieving improvements in the lives of people. However, all approaches are concerned with the relationship between development and governance. In support of Qureshi (2019), Furher (1996, p. 220) alludes that development is usually seen as crucially determined by structures of governance; governance is interpreted through and shaped by the goal of development. In addition, Furher (1996, p. 220) claims that most development theory equates development with national economic growth and sees the state as its primary agent; consequently, one of its central concerns is to understand and explain the role of the state in development and the nature of government-market relations. In supplementing Furher (1996), Halperin (2018) concludes that because the above explanations relate to the development outcomes to the extent and form of the state's role in development, there is a close relationship between development theory and practice.

Scoones (2016) addresses that development theory has changed over time with changes in ideology and the international environment, and as it changes, so do its conceptions of development and governance and how they are related. Scoones (2016) further demonstrated that changing conceptions of governance and its relation to development can be traced through the major perspectives on development that have emerged since World War II, as represented by theories of modernization and growth, dependency and world systems theories, the resurgence of neoclassical theory, and an array of newer critical perspectives. Schoburgh (2012); Sinan, Anirudh, Ding, Rozlyn, Tobin, Wei, and Ceylan (2022) add that development is increasingly being locally driven by the uneven impact of globalisation on countries and geographic areas within countries. However, Sinan *et al.* (2022) state that, indeed, it is acknowledged that the opportunities and risks that come with globalization have different implications for territories as well as the groups that inhabit them.

## Conceptualising the Local Economic Development

Abrahams (2018) states that LED has increasingly become an important component of local government's core function whereas, on the other hand, it's faced with the challenge of ensuring the sustainable development of initiatives that will meet the basic needs of local communities and simultaneously improve the quality of people's lives and contribute to the growth of the local economy. However, Jili (2019) expresses that LED means working directly to build up the economic capacity of localities to improve their economic future and the quality of life of their inhabitants. Local governments have an essential role to play in creating a favourable environment for pro-poor LED for the benefit of local businesses and to enhance job creation (Maela, Munzhedzi & Mathebula, 2025). Similarly, Khumalo (2018, p. 70) addresses LED as a process of improving the locality as a place of doing business that involves collective action from the government, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, and the community.

Cleave, Arku, and Chatwin (2019, p. 96); Thani (2021) state that LED is a growing number of initiatives, ranging from industrial policy and regional planning to community development,

which necessitates formal, well-considered written policies that address LED initiatives. In addition, Ndaguba and Hanyane (2018, p. 5) argue that LED addresses local economic transformation and unemployment of the vulnerable, the economically dependent, and the poor. In addition, Thani (2021) deduces that LED is about creating a platform and environment to engage stakeholders in implementing strategies and programs. In addition, Nkwinika and Munzhedzi (2016, p. 75) attest that these stakeholders develop an LED strategy that is used as a guide, in which the local economy could be enhanced.

Mlambo *et al.* (2019) supported the South African Local Government Association (2012) and Meyer (2007) in defining LED as an approach to economic development that allows and encourages local people to work together to achieve sustainable economic growth and development, thereby bringing economic benefits and improved quality of life for all residents in a local municipal area. The South African government implemented LED to mitigate unemployment and poverty rates in its quest for inclusive economic growth (Ubisi, 2025). The LED is one of the significant moves associated with that transition to DLG (Ramukumba, Mmbengwa, Mwamayi & Groenewald, 2012). The objective of LED in local government is to create job opportunities and increase tax base and revenue bases within the jurisdiction of municipalities (Mashabela, 2020, p. 614; Gamede, 2020, p. 387). LED is a process by which public, business, and non-governmental sector partners work collectively to create better conditions for economic growth and employment generation (Nkwinika & Munzhedzi, 2016, p. 75). The provisions of the 2006 LED framework clarify that the function of the national government is to assist and create the conditions for local action to emerge and grow (Kamara, 2017). Meyer (2014) notes that, within the context of LED in South Africa, it is local municipalities that ought to ensure the creation of a steady and conducive environment to ensure that LED initiatives become successful. Mlambo *et al.* (2022) deduce that in such conditions, the likelihood of pursuing economic development blueprints takes a back seat.

### **Local Government as an Enabler of Local Economic Development**

Moyo (2021, p. 24-25), in line with Edralin (1996), supported by Pugalis and Tan (2017:9), postulates that in this LED concept, the role of local government has gained relevance as an institution closer to the people and directly interacts with locality-oriented development challenges. The local government's position is based on facilitating a more bottom-up and place-based method for addressing development challenges (Moyo, 2021, p. 24). This role of local government resonates with the approach of LED. In addition, Thani (2020); Moyo (2021) added that the global South's political and economic reforms are now centred towards decentralisation to give local governments an increased mandate for playing an active role in local economic development. The success of local economic growth requires a local level of autonomy and territorial independence, which can be guaranteed through a decentralised and devolved form of local government (Moyo, 2021, p. 25). The local government is an ideal place to advance LED by facilitating interactions between local human capital, local resources utilisation, and social capital for leveraging collaborative problem solving to improve people's wellbeing in a locality. Accordingly, local government is placed to play a role in enabling local development by promoting dialogue and connections between local people, local resources, and opportunities (Pugalis & Tan, 2017, p. 9).

Moreover, Boledinyane (2022) asserts that the local government is the sphere of government closest to the people, delegated to provide and maintain public services and infrastructure at the local level. Local economic development is an integrated initiative where physical development must be linked to wider change drivers such as employment creation, capacity and skills development, investment promotion, enterprise development, productivity, and

quality of life (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2010, p. 466; OECD, 2013, p. 9). Local economic development advances initiatives and development projects to increase local economic growth, job creation, and wealth, with a focus on the poorest in an area (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2010, p. 466). The enabling LED role of local governments has increasingly become more important and functional in the north, with local governments' policy premised on boosting local productivity (Ward, 1990).

## **Challenges Associated with the Implementation of the Local Economic Development Strategy**

Koma (2012, p. 125) attests that the sphere of local government is currently faced with numerous challenges and bottlenecks that stem from high poverty and unemployment rates, shortage of skills required to propel LED, a lack of administrative capacity, and ineffective implementation of policies. Rogerson (2010); Kamara (2017) adduce that poor performance as far as LED is concerned in South Africa is mainly associated with a shortage of resources, lack of capacity, and limited experience by the local government to promote LED. Khambule (2018, p. 2) contends that local government has been unable to meet citizens' demands because of inherent incapacities to plan for development, with major inabilities attributed to the lack of capacity within local municipalities; insufficient skilled LED practitioners; a lack of understanding of local economies; a lack of funding for LED; and a lack of integration between local authorities, communities, and the business community.

### **Lack of Human Capacity in Communities**

Masikane (2021) points out that the challenge of LED is to find ways to maximize local resources and the input of local communities. The main constraints in delivering results in 'pro-poor' implementation are a poor analysis of local economies, unsustainable community projects, lack of capacity, and lack of resources (Nel & Rogerson, 2016). Rogerson (2010) argues that while the government's emphasis on LED can be welcomed, if the community who will be recipients of the LED projects are not capacitated and do not have the required skills to make effective use of such projects, in the end, LED as a tool to ensure poverty reduction becomes futile. Meyer (2014) also argues that the challenge of LED in South Africa is that most local municipalities do not have adequate economic growth strategies in place that are implementable and therefore are unable to address poverty and unemployment and ensure the transfer of skills to locals. For LED to be successful, there should be a coherent planning process involving all stakeholders within the local area and there must be a great emphasis on skills development.

### **Corruption within Local Municipalities**

The consequences of corruption can be far-reaching and can hinder people's access to basic services and economic opportunities. Habiyaemye and Raymond (2018) define corruption within two prisms. First, there is grand corruption, which refers to large-scale corrupt acts involving important government officials, including those who make decisions about public procurement contracts, and then there is corruption that usually involves the payment of 'speed money' to 'grease the wheels' or 'to get things done' in cases where inefficient bureaucracy or complex regulations impede a business transaction. Corruption within local government in South Africa has become a stumbling block towards the consolidation of LED (Habiyaemye & Raymond, 2018). Political patronage, cronyism, and the policy of cadre deployment operated by the ANC have been at the heart of corruption, which has flourished at the expense of service delivery. In South Africa, corruption has mostly become ingrained

and, hence, rooting it out will be very difficult (Mathebula & Masiya, 2022). Kochanova (2015) further elaborates that corruption is considered a strong constraint on growth and development (Kochanova, 2015). Adetiba (2016) observes that while there is a need to address corruption, party loyalty and corruption have become synonymous in South Africa, and, most often, high-profile political corruption cases go unpunished. This lack of prosecution paints a negative picture of South Africa in its quest to fight corruption (Skiti, 2019; Mathebula & Masiya, 2022).

### **Infrastructure Availability**

Makhathini *et al.* (2021) opine that infrastructure is a basic requirement for local economic development and the latter cannot succeed if there is inadequate infrastructure available to drive it. In this study, infrastructure is referred to as roads, rail lines, maritime routes, buildings, etc. In South Africa, local economic development (LED) is seen as one of the most important ways of decreasing poverty. Moreover, Makhathini *et al.* (2021) assert that LED must aim to create jobs by making the local economy grow. However, for this to be realisable, it is generally accepted also that it is imperative to develop municipal infrastructure to make it easier for businesses to operate (i.e. houses, transport, roads, water and electricity, etc. The success of LED depends on the availability of infrastructure, but in many rural municipalities, there is a lack of infrastructure needed to support LED. Rogerson and Rogerson (2012) state that while different types of LED projects require different types of infrastructure, there is a general notion within South Africa that the current provision of infrastructure will not support the full consolidation of LED, especially in rural areas.

### **Resolutions to the Impediments of Local Economic Development Implementation in Polokwane Local Municipality**

This section seeks to identify and discuss the mechanisms that can be used to ensure the successful implementation of LED. The following strategies are suggested by the OECD (2008):

#### **Enforcing Effective Leadership**

Mzelemu (2019) added that local development projects driven by local businesses and local people have more chance of succeeding than those attempted by the government without proper consultation with the locality (Meyer, 2014, p. 631; Kamara, 2017, p. 104). The success of a locally driven development project requires effective and development-oriented leadership. Khambule (2018, p. 295) introduces the concept of political leadership, which is required to be development-oriented. Development-oriented leadership is at the heart of rapid and sustainable development, to further plays a leading role in driving economic development opportunities and reforming institutions to be development-oriented. Moreover, these institutions are developmental local governments as highlighted in the *White Paper on Local Government, 1998*. Khambule (2018, p. 295) further adds that development-oriented political leadership is entrusted with the task of creating a positive interface between all the involved development role players. Paramount importance is the effectiveness of these development-oriented leaders. A lack of development-oriented and effective leadership has been a fundamental challenge behind the inadequate success and impact of LED.

## **Supporting Inward Investments, Including Employment-Intensive Methodologies**

According to the *National Framework for Local Economic Development (2018)* and OECD (2008), increasing fiscal autonomy at the local level encourages greater inward investment and reduction of investment leaks since they can support local enterprises that supply the needs of local demand. Short-term employment is created for poor households through employment-intensive methodologies (Ntonzima & Binza, 2011, p. 660). The assets for the community can be found not only in the multiplier effects of generating employment but also in the building of infrastructure and physical assets for the community that enables crops and other goods to flow to the local market and improve rural access to health care, education, and other social services (National Framework for Local Economic Development, 2018). When donors and firms select tenders from local firms or engage in community sub-contracting, the local economy experiences a rise in employment, and the wages that are spent locally stimulate the local economy. *National Framework for Local Economic Development (2018)* advises that the employment-intensive infrastructure creation and maintenance has also been used as a mechanism for cash infusions into weak economies and temporary job creation for vulnerable households.

## **Municipal Government Infrastructure Development through Local Tendering**

Thani (2021) added that the municipality should promote enterprise competitiveness, value chain upgrading, and cluster building are avenues that can increase the competitiveness of a territory. Moreover, Thani (2021) alluded that through increased integration of network relationships in the form of linkages to markets, buyers, suppliers (i.e. value chains), and business clusters, the efficiency in product and service creation can be improved; previously untapped markets may be opened; and innovations in products are made possible. OECD (2020) stipulates that a well-functioning business licensing process is transparent in both the fees that are required and the services that will be available to the applicant after registration. A streamlined business registration and licensing system provides several benefits. This can increase local tax revenues for the government, which bolsters local reserves to further the local business enabling environment, create opportunities for sub-contracting with larger, formal sector clients, and government, reduce vulnerability to corruption and provide enterprises with access to legal recourse, build a local roster of businesses to better coordinate government, donor or civil society sub-sector development and promotion (e.g. marketing, branding, procurement networks) and broaden enterprises' access to financial services, while at the same time lowering the cost for credit by increasing the clients and creditor (OECD, 2020).

## **Building Local Authority Capacity to Support Local Development**

*National Framework for Local Economic Development (2018)*; National Treasury (2019) state that substantive policies and measures that promote LED and employment can be categorized into the following: those that improve competitiveness and stimulate demand for investment and employment, those that enhance the supply of employment through social investments and consumption, and institutions that match supply and demand- or where they do not, to address such market inefficiencies or failures. Moreover, the *National Framework for Local Economic Development (2018)* added that the role of local governments has often been confined to administering public services and regulating business activities. OECD (2015) asserted that institutions traditionally found at the local level support enterprise regulation (i.e., business permit and licensing office) and physical planning (i.e., planning and engineering offices).

## **Improving Access to Social Protection**

Canelas and Niño-Zarazúa (2022) opine that considerable gaps exist in social protection coverage for those in the informal economy for a variety of reasons (See brief on social security). In addition, Canelas and Niño-Zarazúa (2022) added that the role of local governments in the delivery of social protection is less apparent relative to other functions. However, in some countries, local governments have been given powers to address health promotion and social protection of their workforce. International Labour Organization and International Social Security Association (2023) assert that this mandate motivates local governments to look for ways to finance health services, leading them to consider and implement health insurance programs. The existence of national social security and health insurance schemes provides local governments with a mechanism for delivering social protection (OECD, 2008). The ability to share risks and pool larger contributions reduces the cost of insurance, making beneficiaries less vulnerable to shocks. National Framework for Local Economic Development (2018) states that at the same time, the participation of local governments and local stakeholders helps extend the coverage of national schemes to remote and hard-to-reach workplaces, including informal workers with no clear addresses. According to the *National Framework for Local Economic Development (2018)*, social protection mechanisms include a wide range of instruments such as employment guarantee schemes.

## **Advancing Community Participation in Local Affairs**

Masiya *et al.* (2019) express that community participation in governance processes is key to the success of LED. Countries need to adopt policies and legislation on community participation and enforce them. Moreover, Phendu (2019) opines that participation should concern both the development of the strategy as well as the phase of implementation (CLGF, 2012). Dywili and Draai (2019) contend that, indeed, many strategies were developed yet were never implemented due to the reluctance of the population left aside during the initial phases. The organization and conduct of this ongoing dialogue between the various local stakeholders should be done within the framework of a permanent consultative body set up for this purpose to create a local coalition (Treller, 2013). Mamokhere and Meyer (2022) added that the establishment of this local body responsible for conducting debates, focusing local stakeholders towards consensus, and monitoring the implementation of the LED plan will enhance good local economic governance and transparency. As far as LED is concerned, local elected officials have realized that elective democracy and participatory democracy are not contradictory (Treller, 2013). Even though elected and having been given a mandate, local officials must still continuously seek advice from their populations in the areas of local public services and LED strategies rather than acting in isolation. In addition, and as Mubangizi (2019) noted, community participatory mechanisms need to be developed in the medium- to long-term, after extensive research and testing. Collaborative monitoring holds promise in this regard and deserves greater attention to integrate learning-based approaches in settings where a variety of stakeholders and role-players interact to contribute to the delivery of services.

## **Methodology**

The paper used a qualitative research approach to understand the scope and nature of the study. The paper is contextual as it relies on existing literature, journals, case studies and government documents to address questions on the challenges encountered in the implementation of LED. To support the study's conclusions, this paper used a qualitative

research method. Ugwu and Eze (2023) proclaim that the qualitative approach is the collection and analysis of non-numerical data to better comprehend ideas, views, or experiences. It can be used to elicit complex facts about a problem or to generate new research ideas. In contrast to qualitative research, quantitative research entails acquiring and evaluating numerical data for statistical analysis.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The paper shows there is still a shortage of skills, unclear municipal policies on LED, poverty, and a high unemployment rate, which thwart the implementation of LED. This is supported by the study of Koma (2014) “who stated that the following factors as the reason why the state of LED is poor, political barriers, understaffing, inadequate financial resources, inadequate skills, lack of clear national government policy direction, lack of baseline socio-economic data, and a lack of coordination. The finding further alludes to Namara, Kagambirwe and Mubangizi (2015) who noted that LGs need to consider a multi-pronged or multi-network governance approach to LED. In addition, the paper finds that it is difficult for small local municipalities to attract and retain qualified and competent LED practitioners due to the limited labour supply within the local labour market and the financial resources available to them to be able to fulfil this objective. The paper further found that the current LED officials lack awareness and appreciation of potential local assets to support rural cultural and heritage tourism, management skills, lack of networking, and poor or ill-maintained infrastructure to support the viability of rural tourism projects. The municipality is incapacitated; therefore, it fails to deliver LED projects. Lastly, the paper reveals that Polokwane Local Municipality is not sufficiently effective in implementing LED. This is proven by the media (SABC news) as reported by Mr Kunutu, where the Seshego Hospital was allegedly failing to provide water services to the community members and the patients (*Times Live*, 2023).

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

The paper recommends that Polokwane Local Municipality should work more to build its administrative capability so that it can improve the LED projects and raise community standards of living; all significant local stakeholders, including those from the commercial, economic, social, and environmental sectors, should be represented in the community forums. There should be development of an inclusive and robust local economy to eradicate poverty and create jobs; effective municipal officials/leadership should be considered as a way of promoting LED and safeguarding the state of LED in South African local government, particularly Polokwane Local Municipality. Raising funds to pay for the recruitment and retention of capable, qualified, and competent LED officials. Bringing the local economy to develop the socio-economic needs in the municipality and provide education and training to deal with challenges such as a shortage of skills, and unclear municipal policies on LED. Lastly, the paper recommends intervention of Chapter 9 institutions to deal with maladministration issues as impediments to effective LED implementation.

In conclusion, the Polokwane Local Municipality's LED implementation confronts several hurdles, including governance and budgetary limits, as well as socioeconomic and infrastructure shortcomings. To address these concerns, the government, business sector players, and the community must work together. Polokwane can achieve real economic growth and sustainable development via LED initiatives that enhance governance, increase financial responsibility, and create inclusive participation.

## Declarations

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